

Positive Psychology : Gratitude and its role within mental health nursing

Abstract

This is the fifth article in a series of articles that explores the meaning of positive psychology and the importance of applying the latest related research findings for the wellbeing of the mental health workforce. It will focus on Gratitude as a positive psychology intervention in its present day use in mental health nursing. It will explain what gratitude is and what it is not. It reports on neurological changes when gratitude is practised. Finally it emphasises the importance of effective leadership in how the application of gratitude can benefit the individual, the organisation and the client. The practical tasks provided in the boxes throughout the article will help the reader identify what gratitude means for them and understand how to further develop its transferability through evidence-based, user friendly exercises.

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INTRODUCTION

Gratitude clearly transcends culture and history and is perceived as a desirable characteristic to demonstrate (Manela 2015) . It is often linked to other factors such as hope, thankfulness, reciprocity and trust and helps to bind people together as it sets a moral barometer as a response to the value of receiving from another an exchange that is not given in self-interest and reinforces the behaviour so that it is likely to be carried out again. When expected gratitude is not shown, feelings such as anger, frustration and putting own needs first are evident. For example, the response to not acknowledging thanks after letting in a driver to a busy traffic stream is well documented and often means that this kindness is not repeated so quickly.

Gratitude, when used as a positive psychology intervention, has without doubt been a successful one. In individuals it has been linked with increased and sustained well-being (Emmons & McCullough 2003, Lyubomirsky et al. 2011), life satisfaction (Fagley 2012), reducing stress related illnesses (Armenta and Lyuboomirsky 2017), Improving relationships (Yanhui et al. 2018) and progressive mental health (Froh et al. 2011). In groups it has been effective in strengthening social bonds (Grant and Gino 2010) , in clinical settings (Geraghty et al. 2010) and in education (Seligman et al. 2009). Gratitude may be thought of as an emotion, attitude, mood coping response or a way of life through involvement with others, the presence of a pet, precious object or having a faith. Macfarlane (2019 a) notes it is not easy to classify but is perceived generally as a desirable characteristic, especially as Emmons (2007) cites it as an intervention that gives the greatest positive benefit in the shortest amount of time.

What is Gratitude ?

It is often something we say or do out of habit, maybe without truly meaning it and therefore lose the opportunity to use one of the most powerful ways to boost positive emotions. It may also be easier for some people to utilise it than others so it is emotionally intelligent to recognise that not everybody has the same ability to show gratitude to the same level. It would appear generally women find it easier than men to express (Yost-Dubrow & Dunham, 2017), in addition, some individuals have difficulty focussing on others more than themselves and there is also the awareness of cultural variations to take into account.

ACTIVITY- complete the box below on **Becoming more aware of current levels of gratitude.**

BOX 1 adapted from Adler and Fagley ,2005

Indicate how frequently you experience the following:

Never

A few times a year

A few times a month

A few times a week

1. I feel thankful for my level of physical health
2. I reflect on the negative times on my life to realise how fortunate I am now
3. I think of people less fortunate than me to realise how fortunate I am now
4. I really notice and acknowledge the good things I get in life

Gratitude is a recognised character strength and was defined by Niemiec (2018) as being aware and thankful for good things that happen and taking time to express these thanks. It is also associated with kindness, love, hope, spirituality and zest as the other five character strengths that are most associated with life satisfaction, happiness, a meaningful life and work satisfaction (Park 2004). It is fortunately one of the most common as well, coming sixth after honesty, fairness, kindness, judgement and curiosity (Park et al., 2006). Macfarlane (2019c) explored character strengths confirming that they are the individual's capacity for thoughts, emotions and behaviours and when these are in balance they help people to flourish in life (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Niemiec (2014) claims that they are the things that positively come naturally to us and what we love to do due to the brain being hardwired to perform them due to constant practice (Linley et al. 2010). Seligman (2011) described them as the building blocks of a flourishing life and the pathway to well-being as described by PERMA – positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

ACTIVITY – To develop the Character Strength of Gratitude

BOX 2 : adapted from Niemiec 2018

- Often offer thanks to those that carry out kind acts or say positive things to you
- Put post-it notes of gratitude on the desks of colleagues with sincere and thoughtful comments on
- For one week at the end of the day write down 3 things you are grateful for and consider why you are grateful for them, being mindful to vary the items.

As with all other strengths the context in which gratitude is used needs to be contextualised and used appropriately. Overuse of gratitude could be seen as ingratitude and may be used if one acts impulsively or overthinks a situation. Alternatively, underuse could be seen as entitlement and may be observed in oversight or undervaluing a situation, therefore, in these situations it is no longer a strength (Niemiec 2014). Friedlin et al. (2017) investigated overuse and underuse of character strengths and suggested it may even negatively affect mental health, consequently managing this strength would benefit from further exploration and seeking feedback from trusted others.

As a strength, gratitude correlates strongly with mindfulness (explored in the fourth article of this series – Macfarlane and Weber, 2019) by helping a person to develop greater awareness and the ability to intentionally savour aspects of one's own life (Bryant and Veroff, 2007). It helps to prepare responses to situations where positivity and meaning can be extrapolated to increase optimism (Sears and Kraus, 2009). Mindfulness is the perfect example of a positive psychology interventions for emotional development and it makes good sense to align this with the facilitation of gratitude focussed thoughts and intentions to gain deeper appreciation of what is good in one's life and recognise the sources outside of self that contribute to this. Niemiec (2014) suggests regular practice will help in reducing complaining and ruminating on the negative by being more non-judgemental and less analytical. Koo et al. (2008) further developed a powerful exercise relating to gratitude which involves focussing on how our lives would be without a particular object, event or person to fully appreciate their presence and contribution to our own fulfilment and happiness.

Focus on Self

Self-assessment may indicate if an individual has a natural strength in showing gratitude or the reverse and there are not any overnight solutions. It may be that there are genetic influences in personality traits that are triggered by the environment to be responsive or not responsive and like every valuable skill it can be improved and developed by proactive behaviour. Using initiative by asking for compliments to reinforce a positive self-concept, or planning to show gratitude or purposeful kindness on a daily basis with the old adage of counting one's blessings and savouring them is tried and tested.

Morgan et al .(2017), devised and applied the Multi-Component Gratitude Measure (MCGM) which helped in measuring understanding of gratitude, emotions, attitudes and affiliated behaviours and found it could be extended to other constructs. They proposed that positive interventions relating to gratitude ought to be combined with what it is, why it might be a useful quality to cultivate and when it is appropriate to achieve the most powerful effect. Wong and Roy (2018) also comment on incorrectly seeing gratitude as a specific component of a person's life and not part of an holistic overview of appreciative attitude. Wong (2016) emphasises the importance of internalising it as a virtue which will make it more relevant to people from all ethnic-cultural contexts.

ACTIVITY- complete the box below on Identifying why you are grateful

BOX 3: adapted from TherapistAid.com 2015

1. I am grateful for my family because...
2. I am grateful for my friendship with ... because...
3. Something good that happened to me this week was...
4. I am grateful for who I am because...
5. Something else that I am grateful for is... because...
 - To further increase the activity choose something from the range and share it with a colleague. It may be large or small but be specific e.g. childrens laughter, a beautiful sunset....
 - Now enjoy reliving the moment

Further reflection might not only focus on what was received and given but how difficulties caused to others can be reduced. It may be that there are people that exude this characteristic and it is a positive action to keep in contact with them and learn, especially when times are hard so as to absorb their positivity. Learning to focus on what one has in the present moment, appreciating the natural beauty of the environment and comparing favourably to others' position in society will vary individually as will the realisation of mortality and impermanence of life.

What gratitude is not?

Indebtedness is different to gratitude

It is important to be critically evaluative of any research and this is especially pertinent in the emerging field of positive psychology to ensure its robustness. In relation to gratitude it is wise to acknowledge that there may be different views on what it actually is (Gulliford et al 2013). Gratitude could be 'dyadic' – having only a beneficiary and an benefit (Gulliford and Morgan 2018) such as an appreciation of one's life or the beauty of nature. Alternatively, it could be argued that there should always be a benefactor as well (McAleer 2012) and that it should always be positive in nature . It is often seen as a positive emotion as shown on receiving a thoughtful gift , however, this could be tempered with a negative response of obligation or uncomfortableness if the gift was not wanted (Gulliford 2016). Equally, being nominated for an award at work may be rewarding for recognition of one's hard work but may also incur a feeling of indebtedness or expectation of reciprocity and an insincere gratitudinal response would not be classed as gratitude either. (Gulliford et al 2013).

Indebtedness often has feelings of anxiety attached. It may be that that the person does not want to payback but feels obliged to because of maintaining a position in the social network. It may be hard to match the value of the gift. It may feel as though they are expected to give something in return or support an action that they do not agree with, especially if the giver reminds the recipient of their obligation. The use of power can evoke indebtedness as not showing gratitude maybe exposes a person to incur negative actions. There may also be an over reliance on a colleague or mentor or manager and it may be thought that repeated displays of gratitude will "curry favour."

Gratitude cannot be used to sweep issues under the carpet and overdosing on it can lead to over dependency on others in unhealthy relationships. Healthy gratitude focusses on others with no strings attached so it is important to consider the self and the value that one also gives to success to keep a perspective and be accepting of when it is given. There are times when gratitude is the wrong emotion and anger or challenge is the most appropriate one to use in dealing with bigger issues, so context is really important.

ACTIVITY – Other things you might want to try to **Develop gratitude**

BOX 6 :

- Walk in nature
- Watch a favourite film
- Appreciate that nothing lasts forever
- Discuss with others good things that have happened to them
- Focus on your blessings – they are gifts not rights
- Create a gratitude board – you could use images, photos, before and after achievements
- Log onto www.gratefulness.org for inspiration
- Download the Gratitude diary app (free from iTunes) or Attitudes of Gratitude (free from Google Play)

ACTIVITY – Watch and Listen to these **Gratitude themed films and music** - or compile your own go-to list

BOX 7 : adapted from Niemiec and Wedding (2014)

FILMS TO WATCH

- It's a Wonderful Life
- Life is Beautiful
- The Pursuit of Happyness
- Pay it Forward
- Forest Gump
-

SONGS TO LISTEN TO

- Thank you for being a friend – Andrew Gray
- They can't take that away from me – Ira Gershwin
- Your song –Elton John
- What a wonderful world- Joey Ramone
- Thank you – Celine Dion

Gratitude and Neuroplasticity

Studies have shown how experiencing gratitude is demonstrated in the brain. A study by Zahn et al. (2009) found that experiencing emotions involved in gratitude, activated areas in the mesolimbic and basal forebrain which are linked with feelings of reward and social bonds. Their next study reported that people who more readily experience gratitude have more gray matter in their right inferior temporal cortex, which is an area linked to social intelligence (Zahn et al. 2014). Karns et al. (2017) observed that people with more trait gratitude appeared to have more altruistic brains and this could be strengthened by carrying out gratitude interventions which rewards and encourages prosocial behavior. In studying the process of practicing gratitude by donating to charity Kini et al (2016) found that areas of the brain associated with making mental calculations were stimulated suggesting that gratitude is a cognitive and an emotional process.

The importance of utilising gratitude for mental health nurses

Mental health nursing is more than a job as it involves caring for vulnerable others, being supportive of colleagues and promoting positive health in often challenging and difficult circumstances. Expressing and receiving gratitude enable nurses to cope with the everchanging and demanding work environment (Lanham et al 2012). Gratitude has been shown to have many benefits for the general population and also with nurses as a specific group demonstrating improved physical and psychological signs and symptoms relating to lowered blood pressure, better sleep, conveying more compassion and taking better care of themselves (Randolph 2017). Development of this skill may help counterbalance the stresses of work and help demonstrate a more peaceful presence with clients and in the clinical team. Amin (2013) observes that it can also enrich management skills, increase productivity and improve decision making.

Benefits of Using Gratitude for Clients

Due to the varied benefits seen by gratitude practice there has also been research on its use with clients who have mental health issues. Leung and Tong (2017) compared cohorts of clients who had substance misuse issues, finding that those who showed higher traits of gratitude showed stronger coping strategies and lower drug use. In contrast Krentzman (2017) found that clients from an alcohol treatment centre who did not abstain following treatment had high gratitude levels which was thought assisted them in ignoring their harmful behaviours and situations. Studies have shown that gratitude may benefit patients by lowering stress, depression and anxiety (Petrocchi and Couyoumdjian 2016; Disabato et al. 2017) and by reporting less suicidal ideation (Huffman et al. 2014; White et al. 2017). Conversely Celano et al. 2017 reported that cognitive-focussed interventions were more

effective than positive psychology interventions in a group of patients who were being discharged after major depressive illness and attempted suicide. These results suggest that gratitude interventions may have some usefulness for clients but it is too early to ascertain if they equal more standard therapies on offer or are better used as a complementary package of care.

Practising gratitude seems to be beneficial, but little is known about the impact of receiving gratitude, whether this is by words or cards of thanks, or by gifts such as chocolates or flowers, which are seen much less in mental health setting compared to general health settings. Aparicio et al (2018) published a scoping review around showing gratitude from clients towards health professionals indicating it is mainly anecdotal evidence. However, as human beings, mental health nurses recognise that it is the quality of a given interaction from clients that has more meaning than the quantity of less sincere comments and this serves as motivation for further altruistic intent. This may suggest that this is helpful in coping with the accompanied stress of the many crisis situations mental health nurses find themselves in. The ability to reframe difficult situations in a balanced way helps to develop emotional closure towards unpleasant memories of events. Meaningful recognition can be seen as one of the six elements associated with healthy work environments to produce effective and sustainable outcomes for patients and nurses (Pinkerton 2015). In caring, so much time is spent on the welfare of others it often means that it is too easy to ignore individual staff well-being and that this lack of caring for the carers could lead to poor delivery of care. Clients require that the staff are at their best, so understanding the rewards of taking time to experience and receive gratitude is a reward so very well deserved.

Working in care lends itself to being in contact with an extensive range of clients and colleagues from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and appreciation of the variation of constructs surrounding gratitude needs to be acknowledged. Although it is prized in many religions including Islam, Buddhist, Christian and Jewish traditions, there may well be variation in responses and subsequent positive reactions that may be misinterpreted by care workers who are not aware of them. Working with a range of people and mindfully interacting to understand that individual's background to recognise familiar and unfamiliar thoughts and behaviours increases understanding and reduces stereotyping. An improved understanding of others leads to effective relationships in the care context as well as the workplace, at home and in education. Talking to others highlights what is often taken for granted, for example, in terms of background, freedom, health, support systems.

Focussing on others by showing thoughtfulness, being sensitive to preferences and giving of time is effective when it is carried out regularly and not forced. Acting as a positive role model, for example saying "Thank You" to someone who may not often receive this affirmation such as administrative staff or the cleaning staff, or letting someone know they are 'your hero', or giving of time by volunteering to help enables others to mirror actions for themselves and also experience positivity. It is emotionally intelligent to recognise that not everybody has the same ability to show gratitude to the same level. It would appear that in general women find it easier than men to express. Some individuals have difficulty focussing on others more than themselves and there are cultural variations to take into account also.

ACTIVITY -Try out this gratitude exercise to **Increase well-being.**

BOX 3 : adapted from Seligman et al 2005

1. Think of a deserving person who you never properly thanked before
2. Write a thank you letter to them expressing how much you appreciate them
3. Arrange to deliver the letter in person and read it out aloud to them.

This boost of happiness lasts up to a month to the giver as well as the helping the recipient feel appreciated.

Cheng et al (2015) researched chronic occupational stress amongst health care practitioners investigating how practicing the gratitude intervention of writing a diary could improve their mental health. The results showed significant decreases in stress levels and depressive symptoms although this lessened over time it illustrated this was an effective intervention.

The following activity has been found to improve sleep, reduce physical symptoms of pain and worry in depression, (Geraghty et al. 2010).

ACTIVITY – Count one's blessings to improve positive emotions aligned with gratitude

BOX 5 : adapted from Emmons and McCullough 2003

- Keep a gratitude journal and write in it two times a week for a minimum of two weeks
- You could select a beautiful notebook/diary to increase the pleasure of writing down your thoughts and emotions
- Do not rush to write down the first thing – plan for 10-20 mins to appreciate your thoughts
- Write in the specifics and details of why you are grateful
- Prompts might be:

The best part of today ...

Something beautiful I saw ...

An unexpected good thing that happened...

Something I am proud of...

Someone whose company I enjoy...

An experience I am lucky to have...

Clearly, it is not realistic to be eternally positive and grateful as pointing out mistakes, challenging poor practice and showing corrections are essential to delivering high quality care. The ability to forgive occasional, unintended mistakes produces an atmosphere of trust and allows others to learn and try new things again increasing engagement and productivity. This is crucial to help stabilise social cohesion and improve the team's ability to function when both good and bad things happen. Helping others does increase individual well-being and improves mood which supports professional self-regulation in the care arena and

reinforces affirming behaviour. It is naïve to believe that gratitude is a panacea to negativity. It is easy to practice when all is going well but there will be times when it may be temporarily too difficult to show at all and it is then that it will be the most vital quality to help, support and see “the big picture.”

Leadership

Effective leaders appreciate the importance of recognising and showing appreciation to others within their team at all levels. Unless told, people may not be fully aware of the positive impact they are making and in return may feel more motivated to be flexible and work harder to contribute to team and organisational goals. Jin and Eisenberger (2017) demonstrated that when staff believe they are supported, higher levels of overall gratitude are expressed and shown as engaging in pro-employment activity such as working later and volunteering for further tasks.

A healthy nursing team is engaged with their colleagues, managers and clients. They demonstrate dedication, perseverance and initiative in changing times. This is hard when a lot of the workforce are exhausted with increasing workloads, diminished resources, changing job roles, reduced autonomy and the expectation of a workaholic approach to the job in hand. Team development activities can focus on what is going well, explore why it's working well and reward successes accordingly. Discussing with colleagues about good things that have happened to them inside and outside of work might be a positive addition to end most meetings. Working in care can be anxiety provoking due to the crucial decision making and responsibility that goes with it. When the fight or flight mode is activated a range of defence

mechanisms are on stand-by as the causes of worry are being assessed. Gratitude can be developed by sharing strengths and talents so others can learn and appreciate the action, or thanking team members for their specific contributions thereby enhancing group dynamics. Being able to take the time to be clear and concise rather than a generalised comment such as 'that was good' is much more effective. The colleague receiving the compliment will have their self-esteem enhanced and as they feel safer their creativity and productivity will be triggered.

A sincere giving of thanks is always well received whether delivered verbally or through written ways, remembering that a hand written note is a very powerful form of communication as it takes time and thought to compose in comparison with a standard e-mail to all (Sherman 2012). Riordan (2013) comments that teams which encourage cohesion and gratitude increase their performance in many ways, therefore, it makes sense to cultivate this for communal benefit.

Conclusion

This article has looked at the development of gratitude as a positive psychology intervention from a theoretical and applied perspective. It is important to not overlook the conceptual complexities surrounding it and research needs to be aware of its potential ambiguity. Scientific research surrounding gratitude is relatively new with many questions ready to investigate so it opens up the mental health setting as an area rich for potential exploration in gratitude due to its many benefits in motivation, improved health and positive relationships. It also could highlight areas that are more complex such as how using gratitude can control behaviour or why some find it more difficult to express than others. There are of course a range of factors that will influence whether individuals are likely to engage in these interventions or not and how much benefit will be derived. We need to keep in mind that this

is one of the most powerful positive psychology tools. It seems sensible to give it a go and be grateful that this can help us to improve our own well-being.

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Keywords

- Positive Psychology
- Gratitude
- Robert Emmons
- Mental Health Nursing
- Leadership

KEY POINTS

- 1 Evidence Based Practice shows how practicing gratitude has positive effects on mental health and psychological well-being and is linked to forgiveness and kindness
- 2 Developing gratitude will help improve reflective practice with transfer of knowledge being applied to other areas of life
- 3 Mental health nursing teams that encourage cohesion and gratitude increase their performance in many ways, therefore, it makes sense to cultivate this for communal benefit.
- 4 To further improve reliability and validity of gratitude interventions studies with adequate sample sizes will need to be involved in randomised controlled trials

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